

THE LIFE OF AARON BURR

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Populumque falsis dedocet uti
Vocibus.



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INTRODUCTION.

ANCIENT history informs us that Osapho, a Lybian king, was anxious to have divine honours paid to him by his subjects, being surfeited by such as were merely human. This wish of his heart occupied his attention night and day; at last, he hit upon a stratagem to secure the homage due the gods for himself. He established an extensive aviary of those numerous talking birds found in warm climates. His slaves, in secret, taught these birds, whenever they were fed, or wanted food, to cry aloud, "Osapho is a god!" When all his birds were thoroughly instructed in this language, the whole flock were allowed to fly from their cages to the thickest groves, and when the shepherds and hinds came to repose in the shade, in the heat of the day, the whole Sylvan train were astonished to hear the birds pronounce distinctly the words "Osapho is a god." The inspired birds were tame, and had no fears of men; this increased their credit with their audience. The words were repeated from tree to tree, until the whole grove was vocal with the sound. The wonder-struck listeners hurried from the groves to the palace of the king, and fell down and worshipped him. The language of the birds was taken as oracular, when it only arose from a trick to gull the Lybians.

How easily might the scene have been reversed, if some enemy of the king had taught a flock of these talking birds, by the same art, to have said, "Osapho is a demon!" In all probability the ingenious monarch would have been massacred by his subjects, or have been driven into the desert, as hated by man, and forsaken by the gods.

In every age and nation there have been attempts, perhaps less harmless than this, to elevate the character of one, and to depress that of another. Demosthenes made use of all the thunder of his eloquence to drive Æschines from Athens, for he could not bear a rival; and from Cicero's orations, read by us in childhood, we have formed erroneous opinions of Anthony. He was represented by the great orator as not only profligate, but without genius, or eloquence, possessing only brute courage. This was false, for Anthony, with all his profligacy, had a noble nature. The bold attack of Chatham—a more justifiable case—lessened the weight of the Walpoles, and for more than three quarters of a century, caused them to be misrepresented, and their characters misunderstood. It is only within a year or two past that we have fairly seen the truth. History is now beginning to do the Walpoles justice.

In our time, we have seen these instructed parrots who have been taught to declare this one a god, and another a demon. Not only has the parrot and the mocking-bird been so instructed, but birds also of a less honourable character. The vulture, and the raven, after his kind, have been taught to flap their wings and to croak on the left, to give some political soothsayers an opportunity of returning bad omens to the people,

against the election of certain men to office ; and, even more unkind still, the little songsters whose flight was not high enough to be within the circle of divination, were made to flutter and scream at a particular name. I leave the application of these remarks to my sagacious readers, while I make one or two observations on the inducements I have to write and publish this work. From my earliest view of men and their deeds, I have not unfrequently found that the maxim, "vox populi vox dei," was only true when that voice had been long considered, often reasoned upon, and patiently corrected. The first opinions of a people, like those of an individual, require cautious revision. The first sounds from lips that are honest are generally the voice of feeling, not of reasoning. There is hardly a valuable opinion that any man possesses, that has not passed the ordeal of mental examination many times. Knowledge, to be of value, like the fine linen of Egypt, must go through several severe processes, before it is fit for the purchasers. After the tiller of the ground has done his duty, the flax must be pulled, rotted, mangled by the break, scourged by the sharp knife, combed through the hatchel again and again, before it is fit for the distaff, in order to pass to the loom ; and even when woven, must be bleached, before it is used by the tasteful or the fair. The mass of mankind often go through life with crude opinions, hastily formed, and pertinaciously adhered to, for want of the energy of character necessary to examine them. As long as base coin passes current, no one will assay the metals he possesses for permanent wealth or convenient currency. The scrutiny only takes place when the fineness of the metal begins to be doubted. Some-

times, perhaps, there is no advantage in examining too closely. We lose by it frequently. Would the English gain any thing if they were to war with the prejudices of their sailors, or endeavour to make them believe that Frenchmen were sailors, as well as Englishmen? Prejudice is a tyrant of no ordinary power; he reigns long, and with an iron sceptre.

I have seen, too, that the tyranny of the many was greater than the tyranny of the most powerful and most ill-disposed individual. The single despot may be softened, or his rod broken, while many-headed error grows more hoary every day, and his wizard beard becomes more difficult to pluck. The errors of history are often cured by subsequent historians, but when once an individual is slandered, the slanders last long, and become a part of his name. The malignant exaggerate them, the careless repeat them, and some who have put them on paper, believing them at the time, will not be convinced of the truth afterwards; for it would injure the appearance of their record to correct their statements; and not a few are like the divine, who was convinced by the German biographer that the sweet poetess, Sappho, never was a courtesan, nor ever took the leap of Lucate, declared that he never would promulgate his belief, as it would spoil one of the best pages in his work on Greece. It requires but a short life to discover that the opinions of the mass of mankind are incorrect, and that the greater part of our impressions are not exactly honest, for they frequently take their hues from party spirit, in religion as well as in politics. Then, too, a writer gets credit for talents and acquirements much sooner by satire, than by eulogy.

The sarcastic lines of Pope and Young are remembered by thousands, when not a hundred can quote the sublimest portions of their higher and sweeter verse. It is the nature of man to love to look at the dark side of things, as well as to form incorrect opinions of events. They see a persecuted man—

——“ Through the dim shade his fate casts o'er him ;
A shade that spreads its evening darkness o'er
His brightest virtues ; while it shows his foibles
Crowding and obvious as the midnight stars,
Which in the sunshine of prosperity
Never had been descried.”

Long before I had any personal acquaintance with the subject of the following memoir, my attention had been directed to him, as among the highest minds of our country ; and I had, too, seen the baleful effects of party spirit on the minds of mankind. No man can make men his study long, without the discovery of that important truth. The biographer should examine all the opinions that have been expressed upon his subject ; and he will almost invariably find, that *some are overrated, some underrated, and not a few grossly misrepresented* by all parties. When I became personally acquainted with Colonel Burr, I felt more anxious still to obtain further information in relation to some passages of his eventful life.

I had known, also, many acts of noble generosity, in his intercourse with men, and this formed another inducement for me to make inquiries about him. In every inquiry I have made of him, he has given me a manly answer, and, as I firmly believe, such a one as he honestly believed to be true. I would not attempt to defend any man's whole mass of opinions, impres-